

“FYI...& V & T ”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Psalm 71; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Luke 2:39-40
August 25, 2019 - Rally Day

The word “nerd” has completely changed its tone since I was a kid. Nobody wanted to be called a nerd then, though the people I hung out with had little recourse. We kind of just accepted the fact that we were nerds.

But since then, the world has come to accept and then embrace and even celebrate the nerds in our midst. And the Presbyterian Church (USA) rejoices!

Presbyterians are nerds about theology and church history and worship practices and music. In my experience, they’re also nerds about libraries and Bob Dylan and stand-up comedy and Stars (both War and Trek) and gardening and reptiles and military history and French poetry and 80s sitcoms and B.B. King and European football leagues and wonderfully weird book series and ice hockey and anime and British costume dramas and baking and obscure music genres and the collected works of Terry Pratchett and geography and musical theater and that’s just off the top of my head based on experiences with this congregation!

I once described our denomination to a group of non-Presbyterians who didn’t know much about us as “the most-NPR-ish of the Mainline Protestants.” There is something inherently nerdy about Presbyterians because the thirst for knowledge is in our tradition’s DNA. The great-grandfather of our denomination, John Calvin, was a lawyer who was adamant that education was crucial to the life of faith. He established the Geneva Academy, expanding education beyond the aristocracy. Meanwhile in Scotland, which is where American Presbyterianism finds its roots, John Knox was proclaiming “a school in every parish.”

Teaching and education kind of became our thing, and I am so grateful for that. On one of our denomination’s websites three facets of learning are highlighted: informational education, vocational education, and transformational education. So we like to learn about our world, our history, our texts and how these work and function. And we like to develop our God-given talents and our understanding of what God is calling us to do and who God is calling us to be. And, at its core, what we learn in our church community ought to open us up to new possibilities for ourselves and our life together and our witness to the world that we might never have considered before.

This emphasis on education as part of faith is crucial in this cultural moment. While nerds have gone mainstream, we have also seen a hard backlash against acquiring knowledge and thoughtful, considered arguments and fact-based analysis and research. It is often religious people — or people who use religion to their advantage — who lead the anti-intellectual charge. I’m *not* going to make this Rally Day sermon about the Amazon Rainforest being burned, but I do think an argument can be made that this and much of the rest of the environmental cataclysm with which humanity is waltzing can be directly connected to the deliberate choice of greed over knowledge.

This year in our congregation kids are going to learn Bible stories in their Sunday School classes, so that they grow in their knowledge of the ancient shared story of the people of God. And they'll be taught that what these stories teach us about God matters for how they live their lives. They'll be taught that our tradition is directed toward peace and justice and care for creation, all under the grace of a God of deepest sacrificial love.

As they enter the Youth Group, their lessons will engage more and more with the realities of a broken world. They will learn how it is not always easy to keep God's Word in your heart and to love God with all your heart and soul and might. I hear from adult Christians all the time how, when they were growing up, nobody told them the truth about the complexity of scripture or the fallibility of the church or allowed them to question God. If we accomplish nothing else this year, we will have young adults who will be able to say, "My church taught me to be curious and honest and that struggle and doubt are signs of a vibrant faith."

Our adults will dig deep into scripture, asking God to breathe life into the printed words to show them how to be Christ's body in the world. They will stand at the busy intersection of ancient texts and powerful music and modern prayers and a never-ending news cycle and the celebrations and tribulations of their own corners of the planet and they will ask for holy wisdom and peace.

We will do all of that in our kid classes and our Youth study and our two adult classes and the Friday Men's Bible study and sometimes on Wednesday nights and, of course, every time we worship together as well. And the learning — informational, vocational, and transformational — happens daily, as we seek to live Spirit-led lives informed by our belonging to a community grounded in God's Word.

Our scriptures are clear that a life of faith requires hearts that are open to learn. The wandering Israelites were told to recite the holy words to their children and to talk about them, always. Jesus himself had to grow and be filled with wisdom. Many of our Biblical books are self-aware that the inspired words they put forth will be used for teaching.

We are about to commission all our various education leaders for the year.

The blessing is for all of us, however, for a year of insight and wrestling with scripture and wondering aloud and laughter and being moved by exquisite language uttered by trembling lips and getting really, really over-the-top, super-nerdy-excited about the way a well-worn text or a centuries-old concept or a from-the-God-given-brain of a fellow EPCer idea can transform us.

Holy God, from our youth you have taught us. And we still proclaim your wondrous deeds!
Amen.